The Rescue: Centering Autistic Voices in Film

Michael Levy: We have the producer, writer, director. I think that's enough. Seth Bakke, who's going to really tell us why the film came about. What about something in his life inspired him to address this topic, a topic that is centrally related to why we're here today. Also, the perspective of people that are directly impacted as being represented by an individual in this film, to get a sense of their perception, the reality of it, the lack of realism, does it hit the target? To have an understanding of how they feel about this. Then there's your perception and how you feel about this.

Basically a mixture of those variables should lead to an interesting conclusion, at least within yourself, as to what you feel a film like this contributes to everything that we're talking about today. I've already talked about Seth, who this is his film, and he'll have a great deal to say about that as I question him. Otto Lana and his mother, Shelly. Otto is a supreme advocate of multimodality communication community, which is difficult to say, so I just say MC squared. That makes life a little bit easier. Shelly acts as his communication partner, and that's what I am here. These questions were written by the panel members.

I'm basically just an orator or a communication partner. We then have Stephen Tran, who's a postdoc researcher here at UCSD. Behind us should be Peter Tran, who's an autistic typer, a certified life coach, and a poet. Lastly, his mother, doctor Joyce Tran, who's also his communication partner. That being said, I think we should just directly move into asking certain questions as to how this film exists.

Seth Bakke: Wonderful. Everyone can hear me okay. First, I wanted to thank the entire autism tree community, Dana, Rebecca, doctor Levy, thank you all so much for having me. I'm so excited to share this film with you and how it came to be. It originally actually started from my own family experience. I guess in the past couple of years or so, I have been taking trips up to Salem, Oregon to help take care of my cousin Aaron while my aunt Julie was in the hospital. Basically for context, Aaron is a 30-year-old autistic individual, partially speaking, so he can say some certain statements and really, focus in on some words and sentences.

But other than that, I had always had this longing to understand what he was thinking, what his thoughts and his feelings were and his wants and his needs. That longing and my own relationship with Aaron prompted me to come up with the idea for the film of having a movie with Aaron in it about these themes. I started having conversations with people about that in Los Angeles, which led me to Father Mark Mannion, who's a priest in the Catholic Church, who had heard about the experiences of the Tran family and specifically Peter, who you'll see up on the live stream here and his gift of communication, particularly through poetry.

Father Mark introduces me to a poem by Peter Show Tran from his book, My World as a Poem, titled "The Ladder". I'm excited to read it to you now because it really had an impact in the way that we shaped this movie. This is titled The Ladder by Peter Tran. Early memories. Mom, I see your smiling face, soft brown eyes, and gentle voice. But it was just sounds. I heard lots of sounds, just hated the confusion, hurt my brain. Only I did like your voice talking to me, not to others. The fast conversation was grating to my ears.

But when you talked to me, only me, I heard domes, valleys, sails, welling with meaning. There was joy in that one. Warm happiness would fill my heart. A stern edge better pay attention. The sound slowly took recognizable form. Like a sculptor carving a man out of a shapeless rock, ABA helped my brain to see the forms. After dreary years, I could understand most. It was a secret I wished you could guess, but you couldn't. No one knew. When you'd say, throw that away and come over here, my feet would not move. I was stuck, but I understood. But who could tell? Hot frustration like a volcano would flow at times.

You simply didn't know why. I was in Alcatraz. I prayed, God, let me out of this silent prison. Let me out. Then it happened. An angel picked up my hand, and the words took shape on the

screen. Darlene asked me, What party does the president of the United States belong to? Democrat, my fingers replied, I could type. The ladder dropped in, the prisoner climbed out. My heart opened to the world, and Dad fell out of his chair. That's all Peter right there. I'll tell you what. That is what really moved me to make this film.

Michael Levy: After you met Peter and his family, What did you learn about that community of multimodality communicators and typers in general through that connection?

Seth Bakke: I didn't have a lot of experience with typers before this, Father Mark introduced me to Stephen Tran, who then got me in touch with Peter and Joyce, and we had a 2.5 hour long Zoom of me just basically hitting them with all the questions about how multimodality communication works, experiences of their own family that honestly could turn this short into a huge series. It's incredible. Then after that, Joyce invited me to Descanso Gardens where Peter loves to walk. I got to witness practically how that communication works and how Peter and Joyce work together to give him the gift of communication.

After that, meeting the rest of the family, hearing about Otto's story and the Mod Squad and other typers in the community really gave me a grounded reality into how to make this film.

Michael Levy: The films unique in that it's given a story that was written by Peter and features lead actors as autistic in a film about autism. How were you brave enough to take that path, which is a path that's not often followed. Why was taking that path so important to you?

Seth Bakke: I think I would say the bravery comes in the bravery of these individuals being able to tell that story. I was really drawn to the creative choice of the fact that this film blends the reality of their stories, Peter's, my cousin Aaron, being in the film and other families with autism and fiction. One of the most acute ways that it does this is... Aaron's not acting. You'll see in the film, he's not acting. We truly presented him with scenarios and hit record, and he's going to respond to certain scenarios that we give him, which I think is really unique and something I haven't seen done before, that's what really drew me to that creative choice, and the importance of it comes from the intersection of those three elements.

If the film isn't about autism, it doesn't exist. It's not the rescue. It's not a short film that I made. Second, if it's not inspired by a true story written by someone with autism, the hope and the triumph at the end of the movie doesn't become the reality that it can be for the families and the individuals like yourself who will watch it. Third, without Aaron, as an autistic actor, portraying this in a very honest way, it loses its genuine nature and its authenticity. I'm really excited about the three pillars that those are for the film.

Michael Levy: How do you see yourself, the film, and the stories of the typers all connecting?

Seth Bakke: I think the connection is all good listeners. What I mean by that is, I think each of those individuals or groups is on a different part in the path of that. For myself and my family, I think we're still trying to figure out what's the best way to communicate with Aaron? How can we really understand what's going on in his head and how he feels about things and how he reacts to the world. With the family and the film, as you'll see, they're on the cusp of this. Are they going to figure it out? Are they not? We'll just have to see in the film shortly. They're on that phase.

Then I think the typing community and the typers have achieved this or are in the process of achieving that. We're all in different paths, but we're on the same path, but just in different areas of that path. The connection, really, that path is good listeners. I think GK Chesterton puts this really well. He says, there's a difference between hearing and listening where hearing is more passive while listening is an active approach to the thing that you're hearing and often prompts you to a response or a call to action of that thing. The connection here is the good listeners in the three categories of the story.

Michael Levy: At its heart, what do you want the viewers to walk away understanding about the film? Also, what do you want them to understand about the impact of giving typers and the autistic community in general, their own platform to tell their own stories?

Seth Bakke: The first part, walking away understanding about the film. I want this to be a message of hope, and really the thesis is when we can't find the answers to our solutions, all we can have is that hope and the persistence to pursue them, even if it's a little at a time and chipping away at those, because at the end, those will create bigger changes than what we know.. I hope that people will leave this film with that hope and inspiration to continue looking for those answers. The second thing that I want people to understand is the difference between, reality and fiction. I think Peter is a good example of this.

Our film is going to portray a rapid response to the attempt at multimodality communication. But in Peter's situation, in many situations, there's often, scaffolded support at the elbow or the wrist, a communication partner, a language ladder to help build up to sentences. Peter's path was very quick. He moved to sentences fairly fast. Communication and the achievement of communication is going to look different in every scenario. I want that to be very clear when you watch the film. The importance of amplifying autistic voices and r's voices is really that it lessens the degree of separation. When you're closer to something, the more you understand it, the more you can empathize with it.

I think that's really important in this situation because then, like I said, about good listening, it prompts you to do something about that thing. I think the example of this as well is, you know, Shelly and Otto amplifying Otto's voice through social media. Peter and Joyce, amplifying Peter's voice through his poetry. Without them doing so, I wouldn't have run into the story and made this film. You're seeing the ripple effect of how their actions in that sense has, created a broader audience for something like this.

Michael Levy: Many disabled people are told growing up that independence or autonomy means doing it yourself. Your vision for the film clearly didn't happen in a vacuum. Can you talk about your circle of support and the community that helped bring this film and idea to life?

Seth Bakke: Yes. There are three really major communities within this. The first is my family who are partly here today as well. They have always supported me financially, physically, being on set while we were shooting the film, emotionally. My mom, my dad, my brother, and then also the outer reaches, my aunt trusting me with this project with my cousin and my grandparents and my other aunts and uncles who are, always being really great cheerleaders for that. The next one is the crew and their patience and their diligence.

When you're in an onset environment with someone with special needs or neurodiversity, it does require a particular attentiveness, and quiet on set takes on a whole new meaning. I mean, you're not just quiet on set when you're rolling. You're quite on set all the time to really allow Aaron to flourish and to be able to do his thing, which was really special, and they really worked well with. Next is the cast. Having that adaptability. If Aaron wasn't ready to do a scene, we bring in Matthew Campbell, who was Aaron's stunt double in the film, which you'll see. He would hop in and the actors would pivot into the next scene.

They were always ready to do that. It really showed their craft and their improvisation that without all of those three, I couldn't have made the film, and I really relied on their support, their trust, and their hard work to do so.

Michael Levy: Can you share some of the unseen elements with regard to bringing the film to life, the support of the Tran family, the support of your mother, any other voices of influence or encouragement from outside individuals to cue otherwise?

Seth Bakke: Yes, We'll start with the Tran family. I mean, they were an open line of communication for this entire thing. Whether it was asking questions about, Hey, does this make sense? Does this work? I sent them the script ahead of time to just make sure that everything looks good there, and then the first cut of the film went to them. They were constantly providing notes, which was great. Other members, my mom was an onset caretaker for Aaron while we were there, which really allowed me to focus on the art form and the craft of this film so that she could read Aaron and be like, Hey, he can do this scene now.

We're ready to do this. Let's do it. Or, hey, we need to pump the brakes, and let's find an alternative for this moment, which was great, then, I could really focus in on the artwork itself. Other members of the crew came in with their experiences with the neurodiverse community. Matthew Campbell the double of Aaron. He has a sibling with Williams syndrome, who he was drawing on that for his performance as the double. Then my assistant director, Jillian Caforio, she has a brother with autism, and she was, allowing her perspective on things. maybe we should do this scene this way, maybe we should do that performance that way..

Those voices all coming together really started to shape the projectile of the film, which was very cool.

Michael Levy: Lastly, and this is a question from Otto. The film covers sensitive and emotional subject matter. Is there a content warning you'd like to share with the audience and why do you feel it's important to include that context?

Seth Bakke: Yes. This is something that's very interesting with the Indie film space. If you're going to go watch a movie in theater, the rating. You get a G, a PG, a PG-13, that kind of thing. What you're getting into. With the indie film space, it's a mixed bag. So a content warning is really there to enhance your experience and to prep you interiorly for what you're about to watch. That's the importance of something like this, especially in a short film world. But as far as our film goes, the sensitive warnings that we would like to give the first one is auditory. As you heard in Peter's poem, sounds that are grating to the ears.

We really tried to lean into that with some of the voices in the film, as you'll see. Then as well as the visual cue. He also mentions this like, imprisonment situation. We drew a parallel with that with a hostage situation. You're going to see what Hollywood traditionally calls scenes of distress or peril, which is basically, bound at the wrists, bound around the mouth, and the struggle to get out of those things, that's the warnings, and I think that's it.

Michael Levy: I think that's an important thing to remember because the The warning is also specific to the members of this panel, and getting an understanding of how they feel about the film and how they feel about how it represents their story is a very important part of this. That being said, can we start?

Seth Bakke: Let's watch it..

Michael Levy: I'm going to switch gears and have Seth now address really the members of the community of MC squared and address them with specific questions to get their impression.

Seth Bakke: Yes. I'm very excited to open it up to the panel as well. We're going to just go ahead and start with some introductions from the individuals themselves. Starting with Otto, feel free to introduce yourself, Otto.

Otto Lana: My name is Otto Lana, and I am the funny one. I am the sarcastic, satirical wordsmith. I am the one that makes you want to laugh, but you may stifle your laugh because you shouldn't laugh at disabled people. I am here to give you permission to laugh at people, all people when they are being intentionally funny. Quick visual description because we are all about universal design and accessibility. I have short brunette hair, stylishly jelled back, dreamy blue eyes, and a smattering of sun kissed freckles on my face. My pronouns are he and him. Thank you, Dr. Levy, Dana, Todd, Garrett, Rebecca, Autism Tree Project Foundation. Dr.

Spot, Seth Bakke and our panelists for making this event possible. I want to thank Dr. Spot for funding our ASL Translation for our panel. Welcome, Dustin Poloni and thank you to the audience for spending this time with us. Time is a valuable commodity, and we appreciate you investing your time with us. I can confidently say you will receive a great return on your investment. One last thing. I am not an educator, researcher, physician, or therapist. I am, however expert in my own lived experience. We do not intend to trigger, harm, marginalize, or offend anyone with the descriptions of our memories.

Having the confidence to try new things, to reevaluate, to readjust when things aren't working is how we all succeed. Please do not fear failure. We fail far more times than we succeed in life. If you are not failing, you are not trying.

Seth Bakke: Thank you very much, Otto. [Applause] Along with Otto today, we have Shelly, who is Otto's communication partner. Yep, there's Shelly. [Applause] Then we have Stephen Tran over here, who is brother of Peter.

Stephen Tran: Hi. Yeah, I'm Steven. I'm a researcher in Jonathan Sabat's lab. I'm also Peter's older brother. Excuse Peter. He frequently gets panic attacks, and so he prewrote all his answers to the panel questions, which I'll be reading out loud.

Seth Bakke: Yeah, so they'll be joining us via Zoom. I believe they're here with us now. Alright, we're camera off, so [Laughter].

Stephen Tran: Well, here's an introduction that Peter wrote. I am a senior in college at Cal Baptist, a psychology major. I do my major communication through typing on a keyboard or speller board. I work as a life coach on this side, which I love. My main job is battling my OCD so it doesn't take over my life, for which I use every psychology and life coaching trick in the book, plus tons of constant prayer. I'm living proof that God's real because there's no way I could be here talking to you sanely without His grace, plus the love of my parents and six siblings and friends.

Happy to be here, but excuse me in advance if I get a panic attack and run off. I just wanted to be here to thank Seth and advocate for non verbal typers.

Seth Bakke: Fantastic. Well, thank you all for being here very much. [Applause] So now I'm very excited to open up the floor to them to answer some questions I had about their experience with the film. So to start, you'll see, I mean, as you've seen in the film, that there are a couple of different groups that are represented. We have the family through mom and dad, the individual himself, therapists and researchers. And so I guess the question to the panel is, how did you feel that your group was represented in the film? And did you relate or find differences between your own experience and that of the film?

Stephen Tran: Here's Peter's answer. It felt very satisfying and empowering to type my first words. I just love the expression on Aaron's face because I felt the same.

Seth Bakke: Otto, how about yourself?

Otto Lana: The physicality of the restraints were jarring for me. Yes, the idea of being overlooked and underestimated rings true, most definitely. And I witnessed peers being physically restrained, which was always horrific. My stress response was more withdrawn, not a fight response. That withdrawing was perceived as noncompliance or incompetence or lack of commitment or concern.

Seth Bakke: Great. And, doctor Levy, how about you from the research side?

Levy: We were fortunate with my son, Dylan, in that he was in an environment where the teachers really took ownership of the children in class. Dylan couldn't sit. He could only perch. And so the first day of third grade, everybody's sitting and Dylan's perching. So his teacher asked all of the other kids to try to perch for as long as Dylan could. And obviously, none of them could Dylan could perch all day. And so it became more of a thing that was heroic, as opposed to a thing that discriminated and made him different from other people.

Seth Bakke: I want to also bring it over to Stephen because in the film, you only have so much time and so much allotment of characters. And so we missed out on the opportunity to show a sibling in the situation. But I think, Steven, you come from a really unique perspective in being a sibling and a researcher, as well, if you don't mind sharing about that.

Stephen Tran: Yeah, actually, us siblings had a similar thought towards Peter that was actually displayed by the characters in which we assumed that he had cognitive disability because based on his external behaviors, it appeared like he wasn't able to interact with us. So we assumed that he didn't understand social engagement and interactions. So just like the movie, we would actually attempt to get Peter to learn new things or interact with us using really simple reward mechanisms like trading his favorite food for an interaction. Though in Peter's case, he actually prefers rice crackers over strawberries. The movie got that part wrong, and it's okay.

[Laughter] So I can't overstate what a revolution it really was when Peter started typing. And we could see just in front of us that he had such a depth to his emotional understanding and cognition that I had never knew before. He actually has a higher verbal IQ than even I do. And so when Peter started typing, what happened in the movie actually happened. My dad did fall off his chair. [Laughter] True story.

Seth Bakke: On that, actually, I want to discuss the differences between fiction and reality. And in Hollywood, you're only given a certain amount of time, especially in a short film, to portray something like communication by typing. And as I mentioned earlier it took Peter a lot more time than it did in the instances that you saw within the film. And so I'm curious for the panel, how much creative freedom do you think is appropriate for something in Hollywood, our autistic expression in a story like this without misleading an audience or giving the wrong impression.

Stephen Tran: Peter says art, including the literary and theater arts, needs to capture and highlight the core meaning of a true experience, and the rescue captured mine beautifully. Thank you, Seth, for seeing me.

Otto Lana: They see me as a brother. First and foremost, my autism is incidental, not fundamental. I'm the baby of the family. Birth order is probably just as important as my diagnosis. They are my fiercest champions and loudest cheerleaders. They are watching virtually today. So thank you UCTV, for making this a hybrid event. Three cheers for accessibility.

Seth Bakke: Thank you, Lana family. [Applause]

Otto Lana: That is the beauty and power of autistic expression. People will take away what they want from any form of art. Art touches you, changes you. You search for representations of yourself in art. That is why authentic representation of disabled individuals is imperative. Representation shapes cultural views. This is a beautiful dramatization of possibilities. I would never dare to tell an artist how to express themselves in their craft. We live in America and we still have our First Amendment rights. We still have freedom of speech, freedom of expression. Is this an oversimplification of using a text based system of communication? Absolutely.

But if you attempted to create a video about the reality of accessing language and communication with apraxia or other forms of speech related disabilities, the epically long video would make Victor Hugo's novel Les Misrala seem like a TikTok clip. Audiences want to feel good about a topic. If you tried to show the reality of the amount of time and effort it takes to communicate, no one would try. Communication is a Span task on its best days.

Stephen Tran: Great.

Levy: I think that it's important to go into something like this. With an educated view, which you obviously did. Part of the importance of the book club that Otto is a primary member of is that amazing authors want to be part of the book club and present their work, which is fiction, but their attempt at allowing people to understand what it is to walk in somebody else's shoes. And they're now seeking out the advice of a number of our MC squared membership. And I think it's really going to change the medium and change the approach at defining what their lives are like, what they perceive.

Seth Bakke: Yeah, that's great. And I think also the blending of the two, the art and reality allows for moments like you saw when we're in Aaron's perspective and we have the prism creating this fractured look or really drawing off of Peter's experience of these grating sounds in his ears. And

on that, that's a really exciting creative expression that I really love doing in film, and I think it's a great mode for something like that. But on the creative expression of autism, we pulled from a lot of different things from Peter's own experience, from videos on YouTube that were trying to do a similar thing of, like, Okay, here's the perspective of someone with autism.

Pixar's short film Loop was a great example. And on that, I'm just curious. I know Otto, you and I have talked a lot about films and things that we like in that. But for the panel, what's your favorite way of seeing autism expressed in a creative format?

Stephen Tran: So here's what Peter wrote for that. I got chills because the gradient and sensory distortions felt too similar to mine. The feeling of hope and connection when Aaron met someone who believed he was in there was well portrayed too by the clarity of her voice. I listened for the voices of Belinda's one of his aides that has been with him since childhood. I listened to the voice of Belinda and my mom to guide me through coughy like taking someone's hand to lead you through the dark. I don't know how about yourself?

Otto Lana: Autism is such a personal experience, and for each person, it changes over time. Autism also is subject to an inordinate amount of public scrutiny, especially now. Authentic representation is the goal, but with so many different examples of autism in society, how can we actually achieve authenticity? This is a beautiful film and a thought provoking poem was the catalyst. But to answer your question directly, the accountant, too was epic. If you do not know what I mean, go watch this film tonight. The representation of the autistic individuals in that film dramatizes what is possible with the right support.

Seth Bakke: You heard it here first. Watch Count two. Actually At introduced me to the movie, and it was great. So highly recommend, [Laughter] but doctor Levy.

Levy: I watched it because of Otto and, I thought they should get rid of Ben Affleck [Laughter]. And it should be Otto. That would have made it a better movie. [Laughter] [Applause]

Seth Bakke: On that of having Otto being in a movie, I'm curious to a little fun question for Otto and Peter. We'll start with Peter. But if you could be in a movie, a character in any movie, whether it's, you know, sci fi, Western an action adventure, superhero, who or what would it be and why?

Stephen Tran: Peter's answer is, I felt more like No-Face in Spirited Away, who loves Sen because she saw past his monster and tainted with her kindness and willingness to connect. But someday, I would like to be another Sen to help others to be their true selves through understanding and friendship. That's my goal as a life coach.

Otto Lana: I would create a modern day Cyrano de Bergerac where I would be Cyrano. The setting would be a high school. The main characters would be the superstar athletic quarterback who bumbles his words and reaches out to Cyrano, the nerdy student who uses AAC to communicate and volunteers in the AV department for help to win the heart of the head cheerleader Roxanne. The ending will be classic. Cyrano and Roxanne drive off into the sunset in a self driving car. That is the film I want to see. [Laughter]

Seth Bakke: That's awesome. It sounds like Otto and I will be doing some work in the future together. If anyone's interested, let me know. [Laughter] But on the rescue, we depict a family that, as you see, the dad mentions going through the revolving door of different therapists and researchers and medical professionals and looking for that answer and where he says this is Diana's first session, but this is Aaron's 50th, and they still are having that hope and looking for that solution to something like this. I know that there's families out there who share that similar experience.

And so my question to the panel is what message do you have for families like that and families like the one in the rescue?

Stephen Tran: Peter's message is never give up. The person, the soul is there hoping to be

rescued. Typing, for me, was the ladder dropped into the well that I used to climb out and emerge. I was always there begging for God for a way to let others know I was in there. He answered by giving me typing.

Otto Lana: Stop waiting for answers. You have to make your own solutions, make your own opportunities. I love me a sports metaphor. Tiger Woods did not hit a hole in one his first time out. Steph Curry did not shoot a no net three pointer the first time he touched a basketball. You have to commit. You have to practice every damn day to be successful. You have to take action. Even imperfect action is a step forward. Do not be imprisoned by the paralysis of indecision. There is no time like the present. Stop whining and get busy. Plus, I do not want the audience to take the title literally.

We are not in need of saviors or rescuers, which would indicate we are a hopeless, hopeless lot, but we are in need of a presumption of competence.

Levy: I can add an auto moment in discussing getting to this point with regard to this panel. He was communicating with me, and just by the nature of it, it's slower than I would communicate. He noticed that in me and told me, Time is your problem. [Laughter]

Seth Bakke: Very good. There's stories that are emerging from Hollywood regarding the neurodiverse community and autism, and sometimes they lean more towards that savant mentality or the stereotypes and things of that nature. I'm hoping that with the rescue and other films that are seeing that vision as well, are trying to shift the narrative more into a grounded, real representation that comes from true stories. For the panel, what's next for the stories with autism in Hollywood entertainment and media?

Stephen Tran: Here's what Peter says. When I was trying to practice getting on the plane to Hawaii for my parents' 40th anniversary, the most amazing things happened. Mom and I were praying constantly to get out of some crazy scrapes that my OCD and anxiety had gotten us into. Each time God sent an angel to help me, like a sweet mom who gave me a rubber bracelet, to Ben that her friend's autistic kid had used to get on the rides at Disneyland. This got me on the plane. Another time, Letitia, the restaurant manager at the hotel, brought me mango casein-free sorbet so I could get my meds down.

She eventually moved an entire refrigerator into our hotel room. This is the reality that needs portraying. God is our Savior. It works His grace through people. I wish people could see how crazy essential their love is.

Seth Bakke: Thank you very much.

Otto Lana: How many times has Rain Man or Something About Mary been used to describe autistic traits? These are forever stuck in people's minds, unless we fill the void with authentic representations, and more importantly, actual autistic actors, we, as neuro diverse individuals and allies, will have to do the heavy lifting, I'm afraid.

Levy: I would agree that there needs to be some mechanism to integrate real people into cinema or into any kind of productions that are trying to explain their perception of things. To not do so, you always miss the point.

Seth Bakke: Absolutely. Absolutely. And that's why I mean, we were excited to have Aaron and hopefully to have more projects like this be seen to a wider audience. So thank you, panelists very much for answering my questions. [Music]